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Le Monde

THE RISKS OF SENEGAL'S DAVID AND GOLIATH BATTLE OVER FISHING RIGHTS

Massive fishing ships from virtually all the major world powers are draining a way of life from the local fishing-based economy. It could also presage larger geopolitical battles to come.



A traditional fishing boat in Mbour (slosada)

By [Grégoire Allix](#)
LE MONDE/Worldcrunch

MBOUR - Today, dozens of colorful, flat-bottomed pirogue fishing boats can be seen in front of the Mbour beach, 80 kilometers south of Dakar, the capital of Senegal. Young men wearing yellow slickers carry heavy cases of catfish on their heads. Water comes up to their chests. Under the concrete canopy of the fish wharf where an oppressive stench hangs, this beach has been turned into a perpetual auction: thousands of men and women spread octopuses, shellfish and sea breams in the hot sun. Yet, some of them go back home with an empty sack.

"Today has not been a good day for fishing" says Abdoulaye Ndao, the owner of a 22-meter pirogue. "Not long ago, we used to catch plenty of fish; but now, fewer all the time."

Gaoussou Gueye of a local association that supports traditional fishermen in Mbour confirms: "Last spring, the lack of fish triggered dramatic food problems and a drop in salaries. Fishermen had to reduce health and school expenses."

Here, everybody is sure that the "Russian boats" are causing this fish shortage: 21 huge freezer-trawlers from abroad (eight of them are from Russia). Senegal's Ministry of Maritime Affairs, Khouraiichi Thiam,

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sold fishing licenses for these boats to pursue small deep-sea fish like sardines, sardinellas, mackerels and Jack mackerels.

The government's action is seen as a provocation by the Senegalese fishermen, already suffering from overfishing. "These small deep-sea fishes are the basis of our food security" says Gueye.

In Senegal, traditional fishing and its 15,000 pirogues have accounted for up to 80% of the national catch. Fishermen, fish wholesalers, production workers: 600,000 people live thanks to this sector. In Mbour, on July 4, many of them came from Dakar, Kayar, Saint-Louis and Joal to express their worries and anger. "We don't have enough fish to allow them to sell (licenses) to foreign boats" says Abdoulaye Ndao.

In his khaki uniform, the Mbour prefect, the national government's representative in the area, wants to reassure the fishermen: "The foreign boats are not threatening your resources since the trawlermen fish in high-sea zones that can't be reached by the pirogues."

Bara Sow, the representative of the independent fishermen trade union, says this is a joke. "Trawlers keep moving into the zones reserved for traditional fishing. The authorities have been told about it, but it's not getting better." The government has another argument: If they do not sell the licenses, the neighboring countries will pocket all the shoals that migrate along the west African coast. This region attracts thousands of European, Asian and Russian boats, attracted by the plentiful fish stock: like a sea gold rush. Well, so far.

The truth is that the entire planet is suffering from overfishing. "Fishing has become a strategic and geopolitical issue" says Stéphan Beaucher, a representative of the NGO Ocean 2012. He fears the situation could actually lead to a live war over fish, with the world superpowers fighting over the oceans of Africa in the same way they once battled for land.

For the 21 Senegalese licenses, they pay 7.6 million euros: that's 24 euros per ton of fish. These prices fuel suspicions about corruption. "This money won't go to the public accounts. It will be used to finance the 2012 presidential campaign of the governing party's candidate" says Moustapha Dieng, the representative of the traditional fishing trade union in the coastal city of Saint-Louis.

People are angry across western Africa. How many industrial-sized fishing ships comb the African seas? As far as EU is concerned, there are a total of about 500 fishing vessels outside its own zone: 160 in Morocco, about 100 in Mauritania, 60 in the Republic of Guinea Bissau, 40 in Ivory Coast. There are also the fishing-trawlers from Russia, Japan, Korea and the boats sailing under a flag of convenience (Belize and Kiribati). And of course, China. "Until the mid 2000s, China was using absolute wrecks. Now they've been investing in highly capable boats," says Stéphan Beaucher.

To compete, traditional fishing has to modernize its management tools and sanitary operations. In Mbour, for example, the export price is still negotiated directly on the floor of the fishing wharf: while nearby, an EU-funded sales room with laboratory-like facilities sits unused.

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Photo- [slosada](#)

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